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Abstract

Drawing on Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities, this paper explores the various transcultural interpretations of queer opacity, a Chinese variant of queerness within *dan'gai* web series. This study reveals that while viewers employ a shared interpretive strategy of queer reading to identify queer opacity, the effect of queer interpretation is contingent upon the queer interpretive subcommunities' familiarity with Chinese culture. Moreover, different cultures possess sub-strategies of queer reading: visibility reading is often practiced in the global northwest to initiate visibility politics in society, while opacity reading is used in the global southeast in an unfrontational manner within fictional worlds. By examining a layered interpretive phenomenon that involves transcultural reaction videos towards the Chinese *dan'gai* web series *The Untamed*, alongside the *danmu* from Chinese viewers on these videos, this study contributes to scholarship on transcultural queerness through the lenses of queer opacity and transcultural reader reception.

Keywords: queer opacity, transcultural reception, reaction video, visibility reading, opacity reading

A Comparative Study on the Transcultural (Re-)Reception of *The Untamed* and its Queerness with Chinese Characteristics

Web 2.0 features co-operative functions in community building, data sharing, and collaborative information production (Fuchs, 2010). Its far-reaching implications within queer culture are similarly observed in queer community building, content generation, and cross-cultural sharing. While there are studies analyzing artistic presentations of queer content, such as movies or dramas, in terms of transcultural reception (e.g., Jirattikorn, 2021; Sobolczyk, 2022) and adaptation (e.g., Santos, 2021; Zheng, 2023), scant research examines in a comparative manner how different cultures react to the same queer content.

To delineate the resonances and dissonances that emerge during the transcultural interpretation of queer content infused with Chinese characteristics, this study draws on Fish's (1976, 1980) concept of interpretive communities, which underscore the importance of readers in literary meaning-making. Fish posits that variations in the interpretation of a given text arise from the distinct interpretive strategies shared among different reader groups. These interpretive strategies serve as the primary parameter distinguishing one interpretive community from another, encompassing the reader's standpoints, perspectives, and mindsets. Within the contemporary context of (social) media studies, the genre of the contents and the reader's media use are regarded as additional parameters to distinguish interpretive (sub)communities (Lindlof, 2002). Moreover, the interplay between fan studies and interpretive communities suggests that fans frequently draw upon their peers' opinions to refine their own perspectives and form a collectively strengthened voice in corresponding fan communities (Sandvoss & Kearns, 2014).

This study conceptualizes viewers consuming the same queer media content as members of a broader queer interpretive community. It posits that queerness with cultural or national characteristics may not be universally understood and interpreted in a transcultural context, as viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds (i.e., queer interpretive subcommunities) may ascribe and construe queerness through their unique cultural perspectives. This study conducts a comparative analysis, examining self-produced reaction videos by English-speaking, Thai-speaking, and Chinese-speaking viewers in response to the Chinese web series *The Untamed (TU)*, alongside *danmu* (bullet-screen comments) from Chinese viewers on these videos. It aims to investigate which interpretive strategies are used and the subsequent queer interpretations that emerge in and through the processes of fans' layered interpretations of queer content, particularly that infused with Chinese characteristics, thus adding to our understanding of transcultural queerness.

***The Untamed* and its Reaction Videos in a Transcultural Context**

TU (2019) is a *dan'gai* drama produced by and showcased on Tencent Video (a Chinese video streaming portal). *Dan'gai* products, a special genre on the Chinese Mainland, have arisen in response to the constraints imposed on queer content by governmental regulations and sociocultural norms (Hu et al., 2024; Ye, 2022). The term *dan* represents *danmei* (boys' love), and *gai* signifies adaptation. Centered around two male Daoist cultivators seeking vengeance, *TU* was the foremost production with queer content in China during 2019. Its popularity spread beyond China, with fan meetings in Thailand and broadcast rights acquired in South Korea and Japan. It is also available on streaming platforms like Netflix and YouTube for global viewers. Apart from *TU*, another more recent

and popular *dan 'gai* web series is *Word of Honor* (2021). However, due to a political scandal involving one of its protagonists, this series and its related reaction videos have been removed from major Chinese online platforms. Given these circumstances, we selected *TU* as the focus of our study on transcultural reception, as particular viewers had documented their viewing experiences and shared their reactions online.

These user-generated online videos are commonly referred to as reaction videos. Juxtaposed with a mini-window displaying the original content, reaction videos capture the genuine, real-time reactions of reactors to a given video. Even if the reactors are initially unfamiliar with the content being watched, they gradually become engrossed by the narrative, the fictional characters, and the performers. In this process, they develop an identity akin to that of fan viewers. Additionally, these reaction videos attract fans of the original story and performers, inviting them to re-engage with the content collectively, alongside the featured reactors in the reaction videos. Unlike reactions occurring in private settings, reactions depicted within reaction videos are subject to the scrutiny of a widespread online audience. Concerns regarding the “naturalness” and “authenticity” of the content depicted in reaction videos may arise, given the potential for reactors to conceal their genuine thoughts or exaggerate their reactions to entertain and attract more attention from their viewers, as well as to edit their videos prior to upload. However, drawing on Bakhtinian philosophies of dialogism and intersubjectivity (Bakhtin, 1981, 1990), it is posited that all forms of human interaction are inherently socially embedded, with speakers and respondents mindful of the presence of others and their choice of words. Thus, while reaction videos may differ in format from private reactions, this formative difference does not prohibit the content of

reaction videos from expressing “the author’s ‘intentions’” or orientating “the virtual reader’s response” (Moraru, 2001, p. 210). Consequently, the content of reaction videos is regarded as an authentic representation of the reactors’ authorial intentions in the process of communicating with their viewers in this study (see also, Rowe, 2018; Warren-Crow, 2016).

In terms of *TU*’s international reaction videos, many of them are cross-posted and occasionally subtitled with Chinese translations on Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing website. Bilibili provides Chinese fans of *TU* with a multicultural media spectacle through which they can observe reactions from diverse cultural contexts. Particularly noteworthy is its *danmu* interface, which empowers Chinese viewers to post synchronous comments, akin to in-line annotations on specific segments of a text (see Figures 1-8). While watching reaction videos, viewers’ opinions and *danmu* commenting behaviors are influenced by the content of the original video, reactors’ reactions, and *danmu* left by peer viewers (Ye et al., 2023). *Danmu* offer a unique window for observing how Chinese viewers react to the myriad reactions of their transcultural counterparts, thus confirming, supplementing, and negotiating the similar and different reactions observed. Consequently, subtitled transcultural reaction videos with *danmu* form a unique media spectacle of layered reception, making it possible to investigate which aspects of queerness hold universal appeal and how diverse interpretations may emerge across cultures.

We employed a series of criteria to identify focused reactors and reaction videos. Initially, on May 17, 2023, we conducted searches on Bilibili using the keywords “陈情令 外国 reaction” and “陈情令 reaction” to locate potential target reaction videos. The former keyword facilitated the discovery of videos produced by foreign reactors, while the latter was

employed to identify reactions from Chinese reactors. Here, *陈情令* (*chen qing ling*) is the Chinese title of *TU*, and *外国* (*wai guo*) translates to “foreign.” Bilibili’s default layout displays 30 results per webpage, making them readily accessible to viewers. Consequently, we included 90 videos from the initial three pages of search results as our starting point. We then excluded videos featuring reactions to discontinuous episodes, opting solely for serialized reaction videos to facilitate our observation. This ensured relatively comprehensive coverage of scenes depicting queer opacity, thus enabling potential comparisons. Furthermore, videos containing fewer than 50 *danmu* were excluded. Based on our observations, the minimum number of *danmu* in our targeted videos typically hovered around 20. Therefore, we established 50 *danmu* as the threshold to ensure an ample supply for analysis of reader reception. Notably, all figures in this article are captured from these videos, which are publicly available in the Bilibili accounts of each uploader. The figure captions and the reference list include links to the original videos.

After filtering duplicates and entries not meeting the criteria, four groups of reactors with different cultural imprints were selected for comparison, namely Reactor 1, Reactor 2, Reactors 3, and Reactors 4. In detail, Reactor 1 is an English-speaking female, and Reactor 2 is an English-speaking male. Reactors 3 feature four Thai-speaking reactors, including one female and three males. Reactors 4 include three Chinese-speaking reactors, with two males and one female. These videos were further categorized into non-Asian and Asian groups based on the language employed by the reactors, since language and culture are intrinsically interconnected, with language serving as the primary instrument for the expression, transmission, and maintenance of culture (Kim, 2003). Consequently, the two English-

speaking reactors were assigned to the non-Asian group, reflecting their exposure, to some degree, to the global northwestern culture. Meanwhile, the Thai-speaking and Chinese-speaking reactors were categorized within the Asian group, reflecting their close association with the global southeastern culture.

In this study, our objective was to explore culture as the primary factor influencing interpretive strategies. Thus, each cultural group comprised both females and males, effectively eliminating biological gender as a potential influencing factor in reactions. Ideally, other potential influencing factors, such as sexuality and ethnicity, should also be identified and controlled to prevent biased observations. However, during the process of data collection and analysis, Reactor 2 did not respond to our messages and had stopped updating their channel long before our study began. Consequently, like many other viewers of these reaction videos, we had to rely solely on observable information in the videos to make comparisons.

Queer Opacity: A Variant of Queerness with Chinese Characteristics for Transcultural (Re)Reception

Queer opacity is regarded as the alternative to visibility politics, which aims to legitimize sexual otherness through public recognition and often manifests itself in the form of coming-out narratives in queer activism (De Villiers, 2012). In the global northwest, advocating for the transparency of queer identity through explicit ways of confrontational social activism is considered essential (Edenborg, 2020) and is viewed as a pathway to social recognition, equality, and personal fulfillment (Johnson, 2020). However, postcolonial and postmodern scholars (e.g., Glissant, 1997; Wiedlack, 2023) critique visibility politics for

being erroneously perceived as a universal strategy, as it fails to adequately account for queer identities within sociocultural contexts beyond the global northwest. Therefore, queer opacity emerges as an alternative to these identity-based modes of queer representation, facilitating expressions of queer existence, transgression, and relationality. For instance, Glissant (1997) conceptualizes opacity as a poetic mode of resistance against the hierarchical structures imposed by Western politics, which prioritize public visibility and identification, often coercing racialized Others to reveal themselves in the service of Western knowledge production. Anna T. (2020) views opacity as a cherished facet of queer existence within the contemporary digital surveillance milieu, where both state and corporate entities wield authority.

In the specific context of Chinese *dan'gai* web series, the emergence of queer opacity is associated with government regulations on explicit queer content (Ge, 2022). To survive regulations and continue their profit from queer content, the Chinese media industry produces *dan'gai* content, encouraging fans' participation in reading queerness from opacity (Ng & Li, 2020; Zheng, 2024). Therefore, queer opacity in Chinese TV/web series is conceptualized as a masquerade where male-male romance is depicted under the guise of homosocial bromance (Hu & Wang, 2021; Nim, 2022). When employing opacity tactics to produce adapted dramas, Chinese producers often highlight traditional Chinese values and cultural elements while downplaying any queer components within the original novels, shaping opacity as a Chinese queer feature intertwined with homonormativity, homonationalism, and homocapitalism (Ng & Li, 2023; Ye, 2022). Given the highlighted Chinese culture-loaded elements and the unique socio-cultural milieu around the production and reception of *dan'gai* content in China, a

transcultural lens is required to examine queer opacity as queerness with Chinese characteristics, calling for decentering dominant Euro-American queer frameworks (Wong & Huang, 2023; Zhao & Bao, 2022).

Similar to Schrödinger's cat, we purport that queer opacity in Chinese *dan'gai* web series exists as a paradoxical phenomenon, as it skillfully challenges the official regulations by "[acknowledging] the homoromantic roots of the characters while maintaining non-homosexuality on screen" (Ye, 2022, p. 5): queerness may not exist due to the requirement for web series to adhere to state regulations on queer content; yet it may exist as producers need to skillfully hint at queerness in order to consistently generate profits from their target viewers who are passionate about queer content. Given the opaque portrayal of queerness in *dan'gai* web series, viewers are required to "uncover" the hidden and opaque queer narratives. For instance, when interpreting *TU*, viewers may perceive it merely as a fantasy and revenge narrative, or they may adopt a queer perspective to appreciate the implicit queer romance. The validation of the existence of queer opacity in Chinese *dan'gai* web series thus hinges on the interpretive strategy of queer reading by ordinary fan viewers, enabling audiences, regardless of their identity, to recognize the potential for queerness in media content that does not explicitly reference LGBTQ identities (Shaw & Persaud, 2020). Queer reading distinguishes a queer interpretive community from the general interpretive community of *TU*, marking the importance of viewers in identifying and interpreting queer opacity. In subsequent sections, we shall address the following questions: how do transcultural reactors and their Chinese viewers converge or diverge in decoding queer

opacity in *TU* through queer reading? What are the implications of these resonances and dissonances in transcultural interpretation?

Decoding Chinese Queer Opacity through Culturally-aided Queer Reading

TU abounds with portrayals of traditional Chinese cultural elements, evident in its costumes, make-up, and etiquette, as asserted by its director, Weiwen Zheng (Vlinkage, 2019). For instance, in episode 6, Lan Zhan unties his headband and coils it around his and Wei's wrists to join forces to confront their enemy. This action implies a homoromantic relationship between the male protagonists, as the Lan clan requires its members to wear a headband, which symbolizes one's self-discipline. The headband cannot be touched by anyone other than one's parents or a romantic partner. An understanding of why its untying signifies a progression in their romantic relationship necessitates a comprehensive grasp of the core Confucian norm of cultivation 礼 (*li*), which requires meticulous attention to one's appearance and attire to maintain etiquette. The interplay between cultural significance and Lan's rule-breaking behavior thus illustrates the depth of his concern for Wei. The subsequent shot, featuring Lan and Wei's wrists bound by the headband, further presents a cultural allusion to romantic engagement. This imagery evokes parallels with the Chinese wedding tradition where the groom and bride are held together by a long red ribbon, signifying their unity.

In episode 36, Lan and Wei chance upon a house with a chicken coop. The drunken Lan takes two roosters and presents them to Wei. The subsequent shot frames them alongside a pair of head-to-head roosters for around 20 seconds, which subtly alludes to a spousal relationship since it appropriates traditional Chinese wedding rituals – one rooster and one

hen may be prepared for a wedding (Yong & Yong, 2023). The use of two roosters as opposed to the conventional rooster-and-hen pairing may additionally symbolize a male-male relationship.

The validation of the existence of opaque queerness in these scenes depends on reactors' queer readings. When watching the headband-binding scene, Reactor 1 displayed her astonishment (see Figure 1). When watching the rooster-giving scene, she initially found herself confused by it but soon noticed its potential metaphorical significance, saying, "So help me God if this is the fucking metaphor. I think it is." She then seemed to gradually absorb the symbolism, but her words, "You are not... this is not happening," still exposed her uncertainty, suggesting that this connotation of queer opacity was not completely comprehensible to her. A Chinese viewer of her reaction videos complemented her uncertainty by a *danmu*: "她说的隐喻是指送两只公鸡作为聘礼吗? (By metaphor, did she mean giving two roosters as a betrothal gift?)" Another Chinese viewer extended the interpretation and confirmed the queerness created by the cultural and linguistic imprints by commenting "一对基 (a couple of gays)," noticing the homophone of *ji 鸡* (rooster) and *ji 基* (gay).

In comparison with Reactor 1's uncertainty, Reactor 2 successfully detected Lan's affection for Wei but failed to associate the imagery of roosters with any metaphorical meaning. Reactor 2 also failed to interpret the headband-binding scene (see Figure 2), as he uttered, "This headband only belongs to the Lan family, not other people, right? It is untouchable, right? But here, how it can be possible? Maybe they are violating the rules, right? Just, I don't know why." Responding to his confusion, Chinese viewers answered

through *danmu*, “因为爱情 (That is because of love)” and “看到吗? 这是月老牵的线 (See? That is the destiny matchmade by the moon deity of love)” to identify and explain the queerness. The uncertainty expressed by Reactors 1 and 2 reveals that queer reading, as an interpretive strategy, does not necessarily yield a definitive or stable interpretation when applied to queer opacity. These two cases affirm the idea that the process of meaning-making regarding queer opacity is not unilateral but necessitates exchanges between fans from a subcommunity possessing a higher level of familiarity with Chinese culture and those from a subcommunity with a lower level of such knowledge.

Compared with the confusion in the non-Asian group, the Asian reactors demonstrated ease in comprehending the implied culture-loaded narrative. The Thai-speaking Reactors 3 immediately grasped the significance of Lan’s headband-untying action and expressed their excitement by shouting and making dramatic gestures. The *danmu* resonated with their interpretation and reaffirmed the “uncovered” queerness: “他们磕到了 (They get it)” and “泰会磕了 (The Thais can get it)” (see Figure 3). For the subsequent headband-binding scene, Reactors 3 sensed the subtle homoromantic sentiment, observing that “they are locked... can’t be separated.”¹ For the rooster-giving scene, Reactors 3 identified the queer opacity and linked it to a more profound sense of affection. They posited that Lan was giving himself to Wei, considering that a written character in Lan’s first name, “*ji 机*,” is homophonic with “*ji 鸡* (rooster).” Chinese viewers resonated with this reaction by reaffirming that the roosters symbolize the price of a bride.

The Chinese-speaking Reactors 4, while not as vociferous and excited as Reactors 3, swiftly discerned the queer opacity. One of them humorously remarked, “那这能随便给吗?”

非父母妻儿不可动哦 (Can it [the headband] be given out to random people? It cannot be touched unless by parents, wife, or children)” (see Figure 4). Similar to Reactors 3, Reactors 4 also noticed the subsequent headband-binding scene, but they also recognized its cultural implication: “这是不是和结婚的时候新郎新娘那个一样 (Isn’t it the same as what grooms and brides do during a wedding?).” They also identified the queer opacity in the rooster-giving scene: “喝完酒挺放荡呀 (Lan is affectionate when he is drunk).” Their recognition of queerness was further corroborated by the behavior of the reactor on the right, a self-identified straight guy, who began to continuously blink his eyes—a habitual reaction denoting his awkwardness with the perceived depiction of queerness, as shown in other episodes of their reaction videos. Comparing Reactors 3 and 4 with 1 and 2, it is evident that the extent of queer interpretive subcommunities’ familiarity with Chinese language and cultural elements affected their interpretations derived from the same interpretive strategy of queer reading. Cultural insights provided by Chinese viewers are a constitutive element that validates and reaffirms queer opacity. This aligns with the postcolonial ethos inherent in the concept of queer opacity, emphasizing the multiplicity of queer expressions and interpretations. It underscores the importance of lending equal attention and respect to voices originating from regions beyond the global northwest.

Decoding Chinese Queer Opacity through Sub-interpretive Strategies: Visibility

Reading and Opacity Reading

In contemporary queer visual and media discourses, particularly in the global northwest, visibility politics dictate that queer media products position explicit descriptions of queerness as the exclusive focal point of a narrative (Garg & Yang, 2023). However, *TU*

diverges from this approach by refraining from explicitly announcing the queer romantic relationship between its two male protagonists. Instead, as articulated by another director of *TU*, Jialin Chen, *TU* intricately weaves the development of the protagonists' relationship into a tapestry of complex storylines and themes, such as the eradication of evil, aid to the vulnerable, and personal growth (Yingshi Mirror, 2019). Shaikh (2023) categorizes this narrative pattern as a normalized expression of queerness, contrary to that of the global northwestern model of pride, which associates queerness with non-normativity and visibility. This normalized queer opacity is exemplified in two scenes in episode 35, occurring 16 years after the two male protagonists were separated due to a misunderstanding between them: Lan and Wei collaborate seamlessly to perform a musical piece, aiming to unravel a magic spell and rescue people. This scene leads to potential and normalized queerness as it hints at their deepened relationship when they work in harmony. In the subsequent scene, Lan expresses his concern and offers to carry the injured Wei on his back. Notably, a comparison between the scene in *TU* and in the original novel shows that the expressed queerness was toned down in the drama, in which Lan carried Wei on his back rather than in his arms. The former can be interpreted as a gesture between close male friends, devoid of romantic connotations, while the latter tends to invoke a romantic inference among readers.

Despite the shared use of queer reading, the four groups of reactors displayed diverse strategies in decoding this normalized and opaque queerness. Aligned with the ethos of visibility politics, viewers from the global northwest employed a queer interpretive strategy, through which they purposefully and openly advocated for the transparency of queer identities. Thus this study delineates it as a visibility reading. We define a visibility reading

as a sub-interpretive strategy of queer reading that upholds the principles of visibility politics, guiding social engagement and activism in expressing queerness. In contrast, an opacity reading, as a distinct sub-interpretive strategy in the global southeast, focuses on seeing the existence of queerness within fictional worlds without explicitly addressing social involvement or activism aimed at advocating the transparency of queerness. Consequently, interpretations stemming from opacity readings are closely intertwined with the narrative content of media productions.

Targeting the two scenes in episode 35, Reactor 1 employed a visibility reading for her interpretation, as evident by her consistent efforts to facilitate the protagonists' "coming out" by characterizing their love as queer love and explicitly acknowledging their queer identities. For instance, she proposed a toast to the screen and smiled, indicating that the queerness displayed is already self-evident (see Figure 5). In the subsequent shot of the music scene, when Wei said he felt stimulated by something, Reactor 1 excitedly replied, "Gay love?" directly unveiling the queer opacity. Furthermore, she appraised Lan as "a service top," which decolonizes the imperial framework of the top/bottom dynamics in a homosexual relationship by endowing the traditionally dominant and masculine top role with a more caring sensibility (Espinoza, 2018). When she saw Wei being carried on Lan's back, she exclaimed, "This is so glorious. I can't believe I am seeing this with my two own queer eyes!" (see Figure 6). This instance of visibility reading corresponds with Wiedlack's (2023) observation that "... even if the (north-)western subject does attempt to understand the Other's difference without creating a hierarchy, it necessarily relates it to the norm that it has previously established or defined" (p. 926). Reactor 1's perspective was inevitably influenced

by the visibility politics prevalent in the global northwest, whether consciously or unconsciously, thereby inadvertently establishing a hierarchy of understanding—utilizing visibility politics to interpret queer opacity and facilitating the characters’ coming out. Nonetheless, her generally amicable reactions were still affirmed by and resonated with Chinese viewers through *danmu*. For instance, the Chinese viewers recognized her appreciation of gay love and commented, “啥也不用说了, 干杯! (Nothing more should be said. Cheers!)” (see Figure 6). They also echoed her speech about “gay love” by saying “哈哈哈哈哈 gay love 精辟 (Hahahaha, gay love indeed).” According to the *danmu*, both Chinese viewers and Reactor 1 employed a shared interpretive strategy of queer reading, as they both endeavored to discern the romantic relationship between the two protagonists. However, the distinction lay in the manner of expression: Chinese viewers tended to use implicit phrases such as “nothing more should be said,” “cheers,” and “indeed” to convey their thoughts in a more reserved manner. In essence, Chinese viewers applied opacity readings, refraining from initiating discussions related to visibility politics in their interpretive process, unlike their counterparts from the global northwest.

Like Reactor 1, Reactor 2 openly advocated for sexual minorities, but his advocacy extended to equate queer love with other types of love, as he remarked during the music scene:

As I have said before, love does not distinguish between gender, or nationality, or age. Love on this TV is great love, you know, friendship, affection, family, responsibility, social values. I will not deliberately ignore good love just highlight their own concept

in the story, I respect every emotion in the TV. If we have love, you have to face it and respect it....

Through queer reading, he initially identified the queer opacity. Simultaneously, he employed a visibility reading to highlight equality in recognizing various forms of love, as evidenced by his remark, “Love does not distinguish between gender, nationality, or age,” aligning with the ideology prevalent in the global northwest. In another instance, his statement, “If we have love, you have to face it and respect it,” was aimed at instigating social change by guiding his viewers on how to embrace “great love.” However, his reaction did not conclude with advocating for queer visibility, as Reactor 1 did. Instead, he further expounded on the concept of “great love” by connecting it to the normalized narratives within the drama (i.e., the fictional world). This endowed the love between the two male protagonists with deeper connotations, embedded within the web series’ intricate storylines and themes such as “friendship, affection, family, responsibility, social values,” transcending mere emphasis on the non-normative aspects of queer love. This again resonates with Wiedlack’s (2023) observation, suggesting that, although the reactor from the global northwest could apply opacity readings to engage with queerness within the fictional world, their overall interpretation is guided by visibility readings to seek social change.

The Thai- and Chinese-speaking reactors both adopted opacity readings, albeit with varying presentations. Reactors 3 not only identified the queer opacity but also intensified it through homoerotic interactions with each other. For instance, they perceived the music scene as “a new way of flirting” and asserted that they could not interpret the action in an innocent way. For the piggyback scene, they showed strong excitement by shouting and commenting

that the two protagonists' relationship is "beyond friendship." Despite their intense affection for shipping, they did not explicitly label the two males as queer or gay. Unlike their northwestern counterparts, who call for others to respect and acknowledge queer love as equal to other kinds of love, they immersed themselves in the opaque romance, thus having already demonstrated their respect and affection for queerness without overtly vocalizing it. In other words, they adopted a relatively neutral and unfrontational stance towards queer opacity. Chinese viewers resonated strongly with their sentiments, as indicated by *danmu* such as "哈哈 (hahaha)" and "对 (yeah)." They expressed their appreciation and reaffirmation in a more contained manner, with comments like "成年人比较能懂这一段, 初高中生就未必了 (adults can understand this scene, but junior and high school students probably will not)."

Similarly, the Chinese-speaking Reactors 4 also employed opacity readings, but they revealed their identification of queerness in a contained manner. Watching the music scene, the female reactor smiled slightly and commented that it was unusual for Lan's emotion to be so explicit. The male reactor in the middle chose not to address the issue directly, simply using a set of modal particles "哟哟哟 (yoyoyoyo)" to signal his identification of the queerness. The other male reactor on the right once again blinked and took his eyes off the screen to show his awkwardness (see Figure 7). The male reactors displayed a mirrored awkwardness when they watched the piggyback scene. Chinese viewers noticed this and commented hilariously: "总感觉伟哥眼神都不敢往这种剧情上瞟呢 (I always feel that Brother Wei (the male reactor on the right) dares not glance at the screen when action like this is shown)" and "两男的坐立不安 (the two guys are feeling restless)" (see Figure 8).

These male reactors displayed their awkwardness in a respectful and peaceful manner, opting to continue watching subsequent episodes while gradually accepting the queer narrative embedded in *TU*. In response to their discomfort, Chinese viewers also gently mocked them without openly criticizing or instructing them on what to do.

These instances of layered interpretation highlight a crucial aspect of queer opacity and opacity reading: an unfrontational alternative to the identity-based forms of confrontational social activism prevalent in the global northwest. Serving as an optical spectrum that encompasses ambiguous in-betweenness, opacity disrupts the dichotomies of gay/straight, in the closet/coming out, shame/pride, and visible/invisible, which historically have imposed a double bind on queer individuals, expressions, and understanding. In China, this discourse of queer opacity represents a sort of bloodless “Glorious Revolution,” wherein queerness is subtly and gradually disseminated without inciting conflict between a so-called pro-queer camp and an anti-queer camp. Without being heavily influenced by visibility politics, Chinese viewers approach interpretations of *TU* without predetermined stances towards queerness. This unfrontational means of disseminating queerness serves as another effective sub-interpretive strategy within the toolkit of queer reading alongside visibility reading, offering individuals with neutral or less intense attitudes towards queerness the opportunity to gradually appreciate queer culture through engagement with queer content and others.

Conclusion

Due to the implicit and paradoxical characteristics of queer opacity, transcultural viewers of the broader queer interpretive community of *TU* share the interpretive strategy of

queer reading, which underscores the importance of readers in constructing, identifying, interpreting, and validating the presence of queer opacity in media content. Meanwhile, the varying effects of queer reading necessitate a cultural lens to uncover the intricacies of queer interpretation across different cultural contexts. This study identifies two culture-specific interpretive strategies for queer reading, namely visibility readings and opacity readings. Reactors influenced by global northwestern culture tend to employ visibility readings to overtly articulate queer elements of opaque content, aiming to effect social change in the real world by enhancing the visibility of queer communities. Conversely, individuals influenced by global southeastern culture often utilize opacity readings to interpret queerness within the narratives and fictional worlds of media content.

Through an examination of a layered meaning-making process involving transcultural reactors and Chinese viewers, opacity reading emerges as an unfrontational means of disseminating queerness within the global southeast, particularly within the context of China. Unlike the identity-based, transparent, and confrontational visibility politics and visibility readings prevalent in the global northwest, opaque strategies eschew polarizing stances and foster harmonious in-betweenness. This approach provides opportunities for individuals with neutral or less intense perspectives towards queer themes to gradually engage with and appreciate queer culture. Overall, both visibility reading and opacity reading serve as effective, culture-specific interpretive strategies that contribute to the advancement of queerness in society.

In summary, transcultural reaction videos to queer content serve as spaces where multi-layered discussions and negotiations thrive, thereby reaffirming the emergence and

facilitating the communication of queer opacity as an alternative form of queerness. These videos also showcase new imaginings, expressions, and dialogues of queerness from transcultural communities. The analysis and comprehension of Chinese queerness with cultural nuances serve as a challenge to the hegemony of universalized representations shaped by visibility politics. Moreover, such endeavors facilitate the development of unfrontational approaches tailored to the socio-cultural landscape of the global southeast, thereby expanding the avenues for queer expression within society.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article are available and accessible in the article and in its online supplementary material, with links listed in the figure captions and references. Additionally, correspondence concerning details about the data, reaction videos and this article should be addressed to Yuqi Hu, College of Foreign Studies, 601 Huangpu Blvd, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, Guangdong, PRC. Email: yuqihu02@126.com.

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Note

1. All of Reactors 3's words are originally in Thai.

List of figure captions**Figure 1**

Reactor 1: the Headband-binding Scene (Source: Modaojuezhongduzhong Bilibili account, 2022, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hS4y1L7v3?p=6&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 2

Reactor 2: the Headband-binding Scene (Source: Pangfei15 Bilibili account, 2020, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Zi4y1t7Ww/?p=6&spm_id_from=pageDriver&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 3

Reactors 3: the Headband-binding Scene (Source: Yuanguanguandeajing Bilibili account, 2019, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1V4411z7gU/?p=14&spm_id_from=pageDriver&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 4

Reactors 4: the Headband-binding Scene (Source: Jutoulianggeban Bilibili account, 2023a, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1kV411u7eC/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 5

Reactor 1: the Piggyback Scene (Source: jxd290 Bilibili account, 2021, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Rv411Y7qu/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 6

Reactor 1's Toast and Danmu for the Music Scene (Source: jxd290 Bilibili account, 2021, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Rv411Y7qu/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 7

Reactors 4: the Music Scene (Source: Jutoulianggeban Bilibili account, 2023b, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1jh411N724/?spm_id_from=333.788&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)

Figure 8

Reactors 4: the Piggyback Scene (Source: Jutoulianggeban Bilibili account, 2023c, publicly available from

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ea4y1w7iL/?spm_id_from=333.788&vd_source=ceda7020e126eaf0d8f7251fd288d006)